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Consumer Council Called for Mandatory Labeling for Biotech Food

Report Categories:

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Approved By:

Erich Kuss

Prepared By:

Caroline Yuen

Report Highlights:

The Consumer Council renewed its call for mandatory labeling for biotech food in light of a survey result showing that the industry does not comply with the existing voluntary guidelines. There are products containing GM ingredients but does not carry any positive labeling as recommended by the guidelines. The Consumer Council reiterated the need of providing consumers with informed choices.

Background

Hong Kong does not practice mandatory labeling for biotech food products on the grounds that there has been no international consensus. To address the call for mandatory labeling in certain sectors of the community, the Hong Kong government introduced voluntary guidelines in 2006 and has been encouraging the trade to follow the guidelines. To gauge the industry's compliance with the voluntary guidelines, the Hong Kong Center for Food Safety (CFS) and the Consumer Council¹ conducted a joint study on GM ingredients in corn and corn-based products.

The guidelines are based on the following principals:

- The threshold level applied in the guidelines for labeling purpose is 5 percent, in respect to individual food ingredients.
- Additional declaration on the food label is recommended when significant modifications of the food, e.g. composition, nutrition value, level of anti-nutritional factors, natural toxicant, presence of allergen, intended use, introduction of an animal gene, etc, have taken place.
- Negative labeling is not recommended, if used, should be substantiated with documentation.

The Survey

The survey drew a total of 49 corn based samples, such as corn-on-cob, snacks, soup, baby food, etc. The presence and the amount of 10 GM corn events² were analyzed. The survey results showed some cases of non-compliance with the voluntary guidelines, and underlay the Consumer Councils' urge for mandatory labeling for biotech foods. Given below are the key findings of the survey.

First, positive labeling is missing for products with GM ingredients exceeding the threshold value of 5 percent under the voluntary guidelines. The survey result showed that 12 out of the 49 samples contained GM corn ingredients ranging from 0.42 to 64 percent. Five samples³ were detected with GM ingredients exceeding the threshold value of 5 percent but none of these samples carried any positive labeling as recommended by the voluntary guidelines. These samples were all snack products imported from the United States.

Secondly, 13 samples were found carrying negative labeling but only 10 were able to provide acceptable documentation support as recommended by the guidelines. Traders of the remaining 3 samples failed to provide any documentation substantiation.

Thirdly, of the 13 samples carrying negative labeling, 5 samples made with multiple ingredients were found to carry negative labeling for the products as a whole without specifying which ingredients were

¹ A statutory organization promoting and protecting consumer interests

² Bt11, Bt176, MON810, GA21, NK603, TC1507, MON863, MIR604, DAS-59122-7, Event 3272

³ Ricos Strips for Dips Tortilla Strip Chips; Michael Season's Baked Cheese Curls Cheddar; Fritos Flavor Twists Honey BBQ Flavored; Lady Liberty Crunchy Cheez Curls Baked Cheese Flavored Snacks; Doritos Nacho Cheese Flavored Tortilla Chips

derived from non-GM source. Some of these samples even did not contain any ingredients whereby there are any corresponding commercialized GM crops. The guidelines consider the negative labels under these circumstances as misleading and did not recommend the use of them.

Given the survey findings with respect to the lack of positive labeling and some misleading/unsubstantiated cases of negative labeling, the Hong Kong Consumer Council reiterated its urge for mandatory labeling so that the trade is required to provide adequate information to consumers to make choices.

Furthermore, the Consumer Council cited that of the 13 samples carrying negative labeling, small traces of GM ingredients were found in two samples bearing “non-GM/No GM Ingredients”. However, these samples were still in compliance with the Guidelines as the GM ingredients were found under the threshold limit of 5 percent. Given the possibility of adventitious mixing of GM and non GM crops, the Consumer therefore suggested the trade to avoid using negative labeling and lower the threshold level of 5 percent.

The Response of the Trade

It was reported that the Hong Kong Food Safety Center has written to the Hong Kong traders in question reminding them to observe the voluntary guidelines. Upon notification of the test results, the agents of three product samples carrying negative labeling with no documentation support have agreed to remove the negative labeling. Distributors of two samples considered carrying “misleading negative labels” also deleted the negative claims on the packaging. Furthermore, the local agent of a food sample found with GM ingredients exceeding 5 percent (Ricos) agreed to affix “GMO Claims” on the labels.

While there are repeated urges of the Hong Kong Consumer Council and green groups to practice mandatory labeling for biotech foods, there are opposition voices in the industry. Many argue that Hong Kong relies on food imports. Mandatory labeling will increase food cost and reduce consumer food choices. Also, some even challenged whether the Hong Kong Food Safety Center has the mandate to introduce and implement GM labeling issue as it is not related to food safety issue.

Anyhow, the Hong Kong government has no sign of implementing mandatory labeling before there is any international consensus. Their immediate plan is to regulate biotech food by introducing a mandatory pre-market safety assessment scheme. According to the proposed regulatory framework, a GM food developer would need to apply to the Hong Kong government if any food products containing its GM ingredients are to be sold in Hong Kong. Details are provided at a [report](#) on FAS website.

Source of Information

The full survey is available at the CHOICE MAGAZINE (issue 438) (Chinese Version only).